

JEAN VAN LOON

## Life List

PHILIP STOPS TO WAIT FOR MAVIS. He knows better than to offer help. The low sky shrouds the birders farther along the path, on what was to have been his day of respite. He plants his feet wide on the rough terrain, rests his hands on rubber-coated binoculars. Beneath his dripping poncho, he's almost too warm in the shirt he chose in the cool of early morning—a favourite plaid, the flannel soft with age. He takes the opportunity to roll his sleeves. The poncho was a good buy. It's plastic, came from Canadian Tire in a pouch; once dry it'll be easy to fold and toss in the hatchback with the field glasses and scope, maps and sweaters.

Mavis shuffles across the rain-soaked footbridge, pilgrim-like in her hooded jacket, hand clamped to her cane. Her binoculars hang lopsided on the wide-strapped shoulder harness Philip bought a couple of years ago—before the diagnosis, when they thought she was just overtired. Nothing could keep Mavis from this outing. Not weather, his silent prayers, the sleepless night that left them both exhausted yesterday, her fall on the way to the bathroom.

"I've got one more trip in me," she said. "I'm going with you." Her voice as deep as a man's.

She catches up to Philip, panting through a smile of defiance, so close the warmth of her breath brushes his cheek. His anchor for more than thirty years. She nods readiness and they advance along the path.

"I think we should take the offer on the house," Philip says. "Maybe our asking price was unrealistic." If they sell, Philip and Mavis can buy a smaller place with no stairs, near stores and the hospital.

The path narrows to single file. Dan, a former forester, breaks intruding branches with a businesslike snap. The ends hang dripping in his wake. Philip trails behind with Mavis. He scans the trees for a Cerulean Warbler. According to Brian—the guide—twenty pairs nest in these woods, the greatest concentration in the country. The heavy overcast distorts colours. Raindrops on the leaves create a thousand counterfeits of the darting motion Philip watches for.

A few yards ahead Brian, uniformed in grey ponytail and army surplus, talks with Erica. Philip smiles at the energy in her voice. She's younger than the usual group—retirees or, like Philip, soon to be. Her jacket is the red of a breeding Tanager. Philip told her so, then was embarrassed. It wasn't his idea she should come. One Monday at work she asked about his weekend. He told her about the trip to Amherst Island, the splash of white on the trunk of a pine, a shape barely distinguishable on a branch half way up, the haunting stare of a Great Horned Owl.

"I see how much it means to you," she said. Her eyes skipped back and forth across his face.

Heat flooded his cheeks, he'd said too much. She was a colleague, that's all—bright, stylish, direct—the kind of woman who ignored him when he was young. He hired her a year ago. At the interview she challenged questions, answered from unexpected angles. It set her apart from the other candidates, that and her confidence—she'd go after whatever she needed, in her own way.

"Next time there's a trip let me know. I'd like to try it."

Even before Mavis' illness Philip was careful about whom he admitted into his private world. Only someone he'd come to trust, with whom he'd experienced the hum of human connection. He's never so much as lunched with Erica, except as a gesture of welcome her first day on the job. Like a chill spring in a lake, she takes him by surprise, pricks his calm, leaves him feeling not exactly off balance but as if he can't fully trust his bearings.

"There's the Cerulean's call," says Brian.

The birders stop. Philip hears a Red-eyed Vireo, the Wood Thrush that's flitted unseen along their path, a Black and White Warbler, the loud "wheer" of a Great Crested Flycatcher.

"Hear it?" says Brian—head cocked, eyes bright with attention. "I think it's near that beech."

A line of binoculars swings toward the silver-grey trunk.

This time Philip hears the bird. Three rapid buzzy notes followed by a higher one. His eyes search a ragged elm. In an even voice he says, "I have it. Male Cerulean. The elm to the right of the beech, second fork from the ground, left-hand branch."

"How did you spot the Cerulean?" A shred of carrot blows through Erica's teeth from the salad she brought in a plastic tub for lunch.

"Experience, I guess," says Philip. "You learn to sense where sounds are coming from, pick out anomalous movements."

Erica sits in the back seat beside Brian, Mavis in front with Philip. They're parked near a boat-launch. In the dimpled lake near shore, a muskrat dives and rises again, its tail curved like a hoop. Rain streams down the windshield and a fine spray blows through the gap where Philip lowered the window to clear steam from the glass. On a sunny day they'd have lunched at one of the picnic tables on the lawn.

"I'd really like to see a Prairie," says Erica.

Prairie Warbler—not found on the prairie, according to Philip's guidebook. A species he glimpsed once years ago. Erica expects a lot.

"We may get lucky this afternoon," says Brian. "We'll go to rock outcrops along the abandoned railway. Prairies like it there."

Philip and Mavis have been on many of Brian's trips, as well as ones with the Ornithologists Association and the Field Naturalists Club. Philip helps beginners, drives for the car-pool Brian insists on to avoid parking problems in the field.

Today Brian's car wouldn't start. He phoned Philip at 4:15 a.m. Extra equipment is heaped in the back of the hatchback—pairs of high-powered binoculars for people who haven't sprung for the real thing, scopes in case of a distant sighting, copies of a checklist of locally-breeding species, a CD-Walkman to call birds with their own songs. During lunch Philip's poncho covers the gear. The smell of salmon and orange fills the car, the crunch of celery, the sound of Brian's throat gulping Gatorade. Philip breathes another scent. From Erica—light, flowery, essence of warm rain. The smell of the last days of spring.

Mavis' eyes are closed, head resting against the window. Three bites have scalloped the sandwich in her lap. Philip mourns every ounce that's melted from her, the way skin hangs pale from her arms. The day she told him she'd have to give up birding he was the one who cried, his head in her warm lap, her fingers massaging his scalp through hair she said was thick as a grizzly's fur.

"How long have you been birding, Philip?" asks Erica. She tilts back a tin of Coke.

"Almost twenty years."

"Shhi-it!" says Erica.

The wonder and panic in her voice startle Philip. It's not that long. You tick off birds you've seen, ones you've heard—twenty years pass before you know it.

Erica stares at the lawn beside the car. Philip steals glances through the rear-view mirror. Her skin is stretched across her cheekbones, taut on her neck; a few fine lines frame her eyes and mouth. Late thirties, he'd guess. Forty staring her in the face, telling her she's not exempt. Her pants are the same red as her jacket—breathable, waterproof, obviously new—expensive. The fabric swishes as she crosses her legs.

"In twenty years I'll be nearly sixty." Erica speaks to the window-glass. Her long fingers turn the can. Diet Coke, caffeine-free. On her hand rides the biggest diamond Philip's ever seen. What does it mean, worn on the middle finger?

"Birding's a pastime you can enjoy at any age," says Brian. "I've been on some great trips—to the Arctic, Central America...."

"I was sixty when I went to Pelee Island last year," says Philip. "It was terrific." He wants to put his arm around Erica, tell her it will be all right. But maybe it won't.

The path winds into a clearing where an embankment climbs to the abandoned rail bed. The first few birders slide on the milky slope, stamp their boots into the hillside herringbone-style.

Philip reaches to support Mavis' elbow. She turns, hands him the cane, shuffles to the embankment and drops to her knees.

"Mavis!"

"I'll be fine."

As her hands scrabble for something to grab, her binoculars swing into the mud. She stops, tucks the glasses into her jacket and climbs, one slow knee after the other. Brian and the group watch from above, Erica from Philip's side—all, Philip is sure, resentful of the delay, repelled by this vision of physical degradation, wishing Philip would give Mavis the help he knows she won't accept. By the time she's halfway up, mud has soaked her cords and her hands are coated chocolate. Her rump sways as she gropes for a knee-hold. She must be in pain. Philip should be proud, but he's angry. At Mavis' illness, her insistence on coming. From now on whenever he looks at her he'll see her rump in the air; when Erica looks at him she'll think of it. Can't Mavis see there comes a time when trying is ridiculous, the effort isn't worth it anymore?

At the top of the climb, Mavis bows her head. Her shoulders shake. Philip hurries to offer a hand and a Kleenex. The face she raises to him is red with laughter. Her glasses are fogged.

"I haven't played in the mud like this since kindergarten."

All afternoon Erica shadows Philip and Mavis. Feeling sorry, no doubt, keeping them company at the back of the line. Along the rail bed, without the dense overhang of leaves, birds are easier to see. They fly more as the rain thins to mist and the sky brightens. Gravel crunches underfoot.

"Your husband is an amazing man," says Erica.

Philip prepares to squirm.

"I know," says Mavis. "What persuaded you?"

"He sits in the corner office like a big solid rock. Whatever happens you can walk in, have a chat, come out feeling it's going to be all right."

Philip catches Mavis' smile. At suppertime—nights when he isn't wooing clients or out of town—he unloads. About the employee who sold secret software to a competitor then quit, the impossible sales targets set by the new CEO, the top trouble-shooter who took two weeks off for a sex-change operation, leaving Philip to explain to staff. Fury, tension, frustration—he swallows them in the office, disgorges at home. Mavis did the same when she taught.

"Remember when the hot rumour was our unit would be sold?" asks Erica. "Philip called a meeting of staff. He said, 'I don't know whether it's true or not and won't know unless it happens."

Let's plan what we would do.' When we worked out our answer—bingo! We should keep doing our best at our jobs. Did you know we'd come to that conclusion, Philip?"

"It was Mavis' idea."

"When people are busy," says Mavis, "they don't have time to tie their woollies in a knot."

Erica talks about a whale-watching trip in Baja California—her first honeymoon. Her groom spent most of the day huddled with his cell-phone behind a lifeboat that wouldn't have held three of the fifteen passengers, talking to some guy in Chicago about frozen pizzas. She took a cruise to Alaska—whales again and fabulous sea-birds. On the Alaska trip her companion woke her singing *Love Me Tender* in his sleep. He flirted with other men, too, but he took great photos. She's thinking of starting a life list of men: the Sharp-shinned Bozo, the Indiscriminate Sapsucker.

Philip chuckles, wishes there were a gracious way to ask her to be quiet. He can hear the louder birds—the Yellow Warbler, which he points out to Erica, the Common Yellow-throat, which he hears but can't see. If she goes on talking, there's no way they'll hear a Prairie or the Golden-wings that nest around here. He helps her spot an Indigo Bunting at the top of a dead tree. As she raises her binoculars, her sleeves fall back. Her watch drapes from her wrist like a strap slipped from a shoulder.

"Attention guys," Brian calls. "We'll have to listen carefully if we want to find a Prairie."

"I hear a Golden-wing," says Dan. He cups a hand behind his ear.

"Yes," says Brian. "Behind that maple."

The group clusters, trying to see through the leaves. A flit of motion zips to the right, gone.

"What does it sound like?" asks Erica.

"Let's try to call it out." Brian pulls the Walkman from his jacket—a new recording, with twice as many songs. He sets the speakers on the ground, presses a button, waits.

"Golden-winged Warbler." A solemn introduction from the announcer. Then the song, as if the singer were at their feet. Silence. A repeat.

The birders wait, scan the foliage. Brian plays the cut again. No luck.

"Still no sign of a Prairie," says Erica.



“All those trips. If I hadn’t come today I’d never have seen a Prairie.”

The binocular harness is tangled in her hood, the jacket that once fit hangs in mud-streaked folds. She’ll be too exhausted to eat tonight, in too much pain to sleep. Philip will spend the next twenty-four hours feeding her pills. But all the while—and in months to come, after she’s gone—he’ll remember this look on her face.

His vision blurs. He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.

When he blinks his eyes clear, Erica’s gaze is on him, steady, almost hungry. She’s seen through him. On Monday there’ll be no rock in the corner office, just a man.

And someday soon no rock at home.

“It’ll be all right,” he says. “It’ll be all right.”